

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Social perception of La Rotonda Park in Portoviejo, Ecuador

Percepción social del Parque La Rotonda en Portoviejo, Ecuador

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Abstract This study examined the social perception of La Rotonda Park in Portoviejo, Ecuador, which is recognized as a symbol of resilience following the 2016 earthquake. Opened in 2017, the park has played a vital role in urban and community revitalization. The objective was to assess how the community perceives inclusion, safety, facility quality, identity, and social cohesion associated with the park. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining surveys from 250 users with 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants. Results revealed highly positive perceptions of identity and belonging (M = 4.38), social inclusion (M = 4.25), and facility quality (M = 4.12). In contrast, safety scored lower (M = 3.65), particularly among older adults and infrequent visitors. Interviews highlighted the park's symbolic value as an intergenerational gathering space and emotional recovery site following a disaster, but also pointed to challenges in nighttime safety and maintenance. The study concludes that La Rotonda Park serves as a model for inclusive and resilient urban planning, whose long-term value depends on sustained and participatory management.

Keywords social perception, urban resilience, public spaces, social cohesion, post-disaster planning.

Resumen Este estudio analizó la percepción social del Parque La Rotonda en Portoviejo, Ecuador, considerado un símbolo de resiliencia tras el terremoto de 2016. Inaugurado en 2017, el parque ha sido clave en la revitalización del tejido urbano y comunitario. El objetivo de la investigación fue evaluar cómo la comunidad percibe la inclusión, seguridad, calidad de las instalaciones, identidad y cohesión social vinculadas al parque. Se aplicó una metodología mixta: encuestas a 250 usuarios y entrevistas semiestructuradas a 15 informantes clave. Los resultados muestran una valoración altamente positiva de la identidad y pertenencia (M=4.38), inclusión social (M=4.25) y calidad de instalaciones (M=4.12), mientras que la seguridad obtuvo la calificación más baja (M=3.65), especialmente entre adultos mayores y visitantes esporádicos. Las entrevistas resaltan el valor simbólico del parque como espacio de encuentro intergeneracional y recuperación emocional post-desastre, aunque también señalan desafíos en seguridad nocturna y mantenimiento. Se concluye que el Parque La Rotonda es un referente de planificación urbana inclusiva y resiliente, cuya sostenibilidad depende de una gestión activa y participativa.

Palabras clave percepción social, resiliencia urbana, espacios públicos, cohesión social, planificación post-desastre.

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Introduction

La Rotonda Park, situated in the city of Portoviejo, Ecuador, has emerged as a beacon of urban resilience and community revitalization. Inaugurated on September 29, 2017, under the administration of Mayor Agustín Casanova, this space represents not only a step forward in infrastructure and quality of life but also a symbol of reconstruction following the devastating 7.8-magnitude earthquake that struck Ecuador on April 16, 2016 (BBC News Mundo, 2016). This event, one of the most destructive in the country's recent history, left 676 dead, more than 6,000 injured, and around 80,000 displaced, severely affecting cities like Portoviejo (World Bank, 2021).

In this context, the park's construction was consolidated as an effort to reclaim urban space and heal collective wounds by creating an inclusive, multifunctional, and resilient environment. Spanning 15.2 hectares, La Rotonda integrates green areas, sports fields, artificial lagoons, a climbing wall, interactive fountains, and a water screen, serving as a space for social gathering, recreation, and community building (Ecuador's Ministry of Tourism, 2024).

The social perception of public spaces is essential to understanding their impact on post-disaster urban life. Pérez (2004) emphasizes that the appropriation of these spaces strengthens the sense of belonging and social cohesion. Likewise, studies such as those by Mejía and Gómez (2015) highlight the contribution of urban parks to physical and mental well-being. In Portoviejo, La Rotonda has played a fundamental role in reactivating the social fabric, promoting integration, and local identity.

Literature supports the importance of public space as a structural component in the development of inclusive cities. Páramo (2010) notes that these spaces facilitate social interaction, coexistence, and the formation of a collective identity. Fonseca (2014) notes that access and use enable recreational and cultural activities, although these may be limited by security issues or socioeconomic inequality. In this sense, the appropriation of space can be both an opportunity for community development and a source of tension, depending on how it is managed.

From a regional perspective, ECLAC (Segovia & Jordán, 2005) emphasizes that public spaces must be inclusive, accessible, and participatory to contribute to social cohesion and alleviate urban poverty. The notion of urban resilience complements this approach, understood as the capacity of cities to resist, adapt, and recover from natural disasters while maintaining their functionality (Nietzen, 2018; Tumini et al., 2017). In particular, parks and squares are gaining im-

portance as areas of refuge, psychological restoration, and community reconstruction (Villagra & Felsenhardt, 2015).

Thus, La Rotonda Park represents a paradigmatic case of how urban planning, citizen participation, and resilient design can converge to rebuild the social fabric and improve quality of life after a disaster. This study aimed to analyze the social perception of La Rotonda Park and its influence on the social and cultural dynamics of Portoviejo. It addresses questions such as: How do citizens perceive the park's inclusion and safety? and What impact has it had on community cohesion and identity? Utilizing a mixed-use approach, we aim to explore how public spaces can contribute to sustainable development and enhanced quality of life in post-crisis urban contexts (World Bank, 2021).

Methodology

A mixed-approach, descriptive-explanatory study was conducted to analyze the social perception of La Rotonda Park in Portoviejo, Ecuador. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allowed us to capture both general trends and in-depth aspects related to users' experiences and assessments.

The target population consisted of Portoviejo residents aged 18 and above. Non-probability convenience sampling was used, taking into account participants' accessibility during their visit to the park.

A total of 250 surveys were conducted at La Rotonda Park from March to April 2024, covering morning, afternoon, and evening hours, from Monday to Sunday. Respondents were selected directly while using the facilities. Basic sociodemographic information was recorded: age, sex, frequency of visit, main reason for use, and perceptions of various aspects of the park.

A semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipal authorities, local merchants, frequent athletes, older adults, and young users to obtain complementary qualitative insights.

Two instruments were used for data collection. The first was a structured survey, consisting of a self-administered questionnaire validated through a pilot test with 20 participants. This questionnaire included closed-ended questions and Likert-type scales (ranging from 1 to 5) focused on topics such as inclusion, safety, quality of facilities, local identity, and social cohesion. The second instrument consisted of semi-structured interviews with key informants, aimed at exploring their perceptions of the park's impact on community life and identifying strengths and areas for improvement.



Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v. 26, which included descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) and inferential tests (Student's t-test, ANO-VA) based on sociodemographic variables. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic content analysis, identifying emerging categories.

The research was conducted under fundamental ethical principles that ensure the respect and protection of participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to administering surveys and conducting interviews, clearly explaining the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of the information collected. Furthermore, the anonymity of participants and the exclusive use of data for academic purposes were guaranteed. The research was designed to avoid any physical, psychological, or social harm, promoting respect for the dignity, diversity, and opinions of the community involved.

Results and discussion

The sample presented a balanced distribution in terms of the gender of the respondents, with a slight majority of women (52.8%) compared to men (47.2%). This balanced representation allows the results to be interpreted as reflecting diverse perceptions based on gender, without significant bias.

In terms of age, the predominant groups were young adults (18–29 years: 38%) and middle-aged adults (30–49 years: 40.8%), who together represented approximately 79% of the sample. The lower participation of people over 50 years of age (21.2% in total) may be related to the dynamics of the park, which primarily attracts young people and adults of active working age through its recreational, sports, and social activities. This age distribution pattern is consistent with other studies on the use of urban public spaces, where young adults tend to be the main users of urban parks for recreation, sports, or social gatherings (Rivera et al., 2022).

Regarding frequency of visits, it was highlighted that 62% of respondents visit the park two or more times per week, while only 16.8% do so sporadically. This reflects a high level of ownership and regular use of the park by the local community. Around a quarter of respondents (23.2%) visited daily, highlighting the central role this space plays in citizens' daily routines, whether as a place of transit, recreation, physical activity, or socialization. The frequency of visits suggests that the park has successfully established itself as an active hub for community interaction, a crucial element in the processes of social cohesion and urban identity construction (Guan & Wang, 2023).

The sociodemographic characterization (Table 1) supports the subsequent interpretation of the perceptions collected on inclusion, security, identity, and cohesion, as the main active users are young people and frequent adults who build their daily experiences in public spaces through recurrent use.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents (n=250)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	118	47.2
SCX	Female	132	52.8
Age	18-29 years old	95	38.0
	30-49 years old	102	40.8
	50-64 years	38	15.2
	> 65 years	15	6.0
	Diary	58	23.2
Visit	2-3 times/week	97	38.8
frequency	1 time/week	53	21.2
	Sporadic	42	16.8

The results from the Likert scales generally showed a positive perception among users regarding the evaluated dimensions of La Rotonda Park. All dimensions analyzed had averages above 4, except for safety, indicating that the park satisfactorily fulfills its role as an integrative public space.

Table 2 presents the averages and levels of dispersion corresponding to each dimension evaluated in relation to the social perception of La Rotonda Park. The results showed that users gave the highest rating to the dimension related to identity and sense of belonging, followed by social inclusion and the quality of the facilities, which supports a favorable perception regarding the emotional connection to the place, its accessibility, and physical condition. In contrast, the safety dimension was the least valued, suggesting a latent concern among visitors. Overall, the data highlight the park's positive aspects, but also reveal areas that could be improved.

Table 2. Average perception in dimensions evaluated (Likert scale 1-5)

Dimension	Media (M)	Standard deviation (SD)
Social inclusion	4.25	0.62
Security	3.65	0.88
Quality of facilities	4.12	0.71
Identity and belonging	4.38	0.59
Social cohesion	4.05	0.65



Identity and belonging were the most highly valued dimension (M=4.38; SD=0.59), reinforcing the hypothesis that the park functions as a symbol of urban reconstruction and resilience after the 2016 earthquake. This high score reflects the emotional attachment that the citizens of Portoviejo have developed with this space, perceiving it not only as recreational infrastructure, but as an integral part of their collective identity (Escalera-Reyes, 2020).

Social inclusion also received a high rating (M = 4.25; SD = 0.62), suggesting that the park is viewed as an open and accessible space for diverse social, age, and cultural groups (Qi et al., 2024). This result is supported by the interviewees' belief that the park serves as an "intergenerational meeting point," fostering interaction and coexistence among diverse segments of the population —a key element in building social cohesion.

Regarding the quality of the facilities (M = 4.12, SD = 0.71), the assessment was positive, although with greater variability (SD = 0.71). Qualitative observations recognized the facilities' overall good condition, but noted the need for ongoing maintenance to preserve the quality of the street furniture and green areas.

The social cohesion dimension (M = 4.05, SD = 0.65) also showed a positive perception. This indicator reflected that users recognize the park's contribution to building social networks, strengthening community ties, and fostering a sense of belonging, which is especially relevant in post-disaster contexts, where public spaces play a crucial role in the recovery of the social fabric (Qi et al., 2024; Lai et al., 2024).

On the other hand, the safety dimension was the most affected, with the lowest score (M=3.65; SD=0.88) and the greatest dispersion in responses. Although the perception is not generally negative, the higher standard deviation suggests that there are significant differences among users based on variables such as hours of use or sociodemographic characteristics. Some participants expressed concerns about nighttime safety and insufficient lighting in certain areas of the park.

Analyzing the results as a whole, it can be stated that La Rotonda Park satisfactorily fulfills its social function. However, safety and maintenance issues need to be addressed to maximize its benefits as a resilient and cohesive public space.

Table 3 shows the relationship between the frequency of visits to La Rotonda Park and the perception of security by users.

Table 3. Comparison of security perception according to frequency of visit

Visit frequency	Average perception of security	OF
Diary	3.85	0.76
2-3 times/week	3.68	0.80
1 time/week	3.52	0.95
Sporadic	3.28	1.02

The results of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed statistically significant differences in perceived safety among groups based on the frequency of visits to La Rotonda Park (F = 3.42, p = 0.018). Specifically, it was observed that people who visit more regularly tend to report higher perceptions of safety compared to those who visit less frequently. The level of exposure and familiarity with the space directly influences how users perceive its safety.

In descriptive terms, it was observed that users who visit the park daily have the highest perception of safety (M = 3.85, SD = 0.76). In contrast, those who visit sporadically report the lowest perception (M = 3.28, SD = 1.02). This pattern suggests a possible "habituation" or "familiarity" effect: the higher the frequency of use, the greater the confidence and the lower the perception of risk, possibly due to the knowledge of the environment, recognition of other regular users, and sense of control over potential problematic situations (Karegar et al., 2020).

On the other hand, those who visit the park occasionally may experience greater uncertainty or a perception of insecurity, especially at night or in less-traveled areas. This phenomenon has been documented in previous studies on perceived security in public spaces, where familiarity and a sense of belonging act as modulating factors for the fear of crime (Sadra & Rezvani, 2019; Reid et al., 2020).

The higher standard deviation observed in sporadic visitors (SD = 1.02) also suggests greater heterogeneity in the experiences of this group, possibly influenced by variability in visiting times, lower spatial awareness, and individual differences in risk perception.

From an urban management perspective, these results highlight the importance of designing targeted interventions that enhance both objective and perceived safety, particularly during less crowded times and areas, to promote sustained park use by the entire community (Vidal-Domper et al., 2025). Strategies such as improved lighting, a deterrent police presence, or promoting organized nighttime activities can help narrow these gaps in perceived safety between frequent and occasional users.



Table 4 compares the perception of park safety between younger and older adults. The results show that younger people tend to rate safety more highly than older adults. This difference was statistically significant, indicating that age influences how this aspect of the environment is perceived.

Table 4. Comparison by age in perception of social cohesion (t-test)

Cluster	M	OF	t	p
Young people (18-29 years old)	4.12	0.60	2.34	0.021
Older adults (> 50 years)	3.88	0.70		

Inferential analysis using an independent t-test revealed statistically significant differences in the perception of social cohesion between age groups (t = 2.89; p = 0.004). Younger adults (18-29 years) reported a higher perception of social cohesion (M = 4.18; SD = 0.55) compared to older adults (50 years or older) (M = 3.89; SD = 0.68).

Younger park users experience the park as a space with greater opportunities for social interaction, shared activities, and support networks. This age group may actively participate in group recreational activities, group sports, or informal social gatherings, all of which strengthen their perception of social cohesion (Ziaesaeidi, 2025).

On the contrary, older adults may face specific barriers to integrating into the active use of the space, whether due to physical limitations, differing schedules of use, or the perception of less inclusion in activities dominated by younger groups. Furthermore, some older adults may prioritize other aspects of the park (tranquility, rest, landscaping) that do not necessarily reinforce their perception of social cohesion, but do reinforce their overall satisfaction with the space (Xu et al., 2022).

This result underscores the importance of considering an intergenerational perspective in the design and management of public spaces, promoting diverse activities that foster interaction among different age groups. Strategies such as intergenerational programs, open cultural activities, or community workshops could further strengthen the perceived social cohesion among all users (Whear et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the lower standard deviation in the young group (SD = 0.55) indicates a more homogeneous perception of social cohesion within this segment. At the same time, the greater dispersion among older adults (SD = 0.68) suggests a more varied experience within this group, possibly influenced by individual differences in levels of social integration, health or company during visits.

The analysis of the 15 semi-structured interviews allowed us to identify four central categories (Table 5) that complement and enrich the interpretation of the quantitative results.

Interviewees identified the park as a space that fosters intergenerational and social connection. The expression "it is a social lung" reflects the central role the park plays in the community's daily life, where spontaneous interactions between diverse groups occur. This result aligns with the high perception of social cohesion and inclusion reported in the quantitative data (Tables 1 and 2). It reinforces the role of public spaces as facilitators of social capital (Woo et al., 2023).

Table 5. Results of the qualitative analysis: emerging categories from the interviews (n=15)

Category theme	Description	Appointment representative	Subtopics emerging
Meeting space community	The park serves as a meeting point for intergenerational integration, fostering coexistence and diverse social activities.	"Here you can see people of all ages socializing, playing sports, or just walking. It is a social hub"	- Physical activity - Family gathering - Diversity of users
Challenges in security nocturna	Although the park is generally perceived as safe during the day, concerns persist about lighting and surveillance at night.	"During the day, everything is fine, but at night, there are poorly lit areas where people feel a little unsafe"	Poor lightingPresence of groupsin isolated areasRequires policesurveillance
Post-earthquake resilience value	The park is seen as a symbol of social and emotional reconstruction following the 2016 earthquake, generating a sense of community pride.	"After the disaster, this park was a symbol that we could rebuild our city together"	 Urban recovery Local identity Community pride
Need for continuous maintenance	Users emphasize the importance of maintaining green areas, furniture, and equipment to preserve the quality of public spaces.	"Green areas need more constant care; furniture should be renewed periodically"	Garden careFurniture repairPermanent cleaning



Concerns about safety at night, especially in poorly lit areas, are repeatedly expressed. This qualitative result complements the variability observed in perceptions of safety (Table 2) and the differences according to visiting frequency (Table 3). Perceived insecurity at night represents a persistent challenge that can limit equal access to the space, particularly for more vulnerable or occasional users (Valera-Pertegas & Guàrdia-Olmos, 2017).

The park is valued as a tangible symbol of recovery from the 2016 disaster, highlighting its emotional and symbolic importance for the inhabitants of Portoviejo. This category explains the high score recorded in the identity and belonging dimension (Table 2). The interpretation of the results is consistent with the literature on public spaces as restorative elements in post-disaster contexts, where their reconstruction represents a physical improvement and a process of collective healing (Nazaruddin, 2025).

Concern over the progressive deterioration of street furniture, green areas, and complementary services reinforces the perception that the park requires active management to sustain its long-term functionality and attractiveness. Although the overall perception of the quality of the facilities was high (Table 2), potential future problems can be anticipated if sustained preventive maintenance programs, a fundamental aspect of sustainable public space management, are not implemented (Ahirrao & Khan, 2021; Halawani, 2024).

The qualitative results offer interpretive nuances that enhance our understanding of the observed quantitative patterns, identifying both aspects that consolidate La Rotonda Park as a resilient and integrative space, as well as those that require targeted interventions to maintain its social value.

Conclusions

The analysis of the social perception of La Rotonda Park in Portoviejo showed that this public space has established itself as a symbol of resilience and a key community gathering point, primarily valued for its identity and sense of belonging. Although most users have a positive perception of social inclusion and the quality of facilities, safety concerns persist, particularly at night, which limits the full use of the park for certain groups, such as older adults and occasional visitors. Furthermore, the need to properly maintain and manage the space to ensure its sustainability and strengthen its integrative role, thus promoting social cohesion and post-disaster urban recovery, is highlighted.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Oscar A. Muñoz: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; research; methodology; visualization; writing the original draft; writing, review and editing.

Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Statement on the use of AI

The author acknowledges the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies to improve the readability and clarity of the article.

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